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The Petersham Lyceum

1833-1848

By JOHN JAY PUTNAM

"This shall be written for the generation to come."—Psalms



WORCESTER MASSACHUSETTS
NINETEEN HUNDRED AND TWO

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PETERSHAM LYCEUM.

During a period varying not much from 1830 to 1850, there was in New England an institution which operated quite perceptibly in the mental quickening of people residing especially in the rural districts. It was the Town or Village Lyceum. It was distinctively democratic in character, ignoring rank and exacting no elevated standard of mental attainment, and yet made efficient by the active support of the most cultivated local talent. The ministers, lawyers, doctors and teachers of a town, during the severely inclement season, assembled with stated frequency for the discussion of a large variety of subjects with their unprofessional neighbors—tradesmen, farmers, mechanics—and the occasions at once met a social want and contributed to the broadening of general knowledge. The remarkable thing about these meetings was the amount of information often shown by plain, sensible, well-informed men without scholastic pretension, and little accustomed to public speaking. Their manner, facility and fitness of expression, as well oftentimes as their clinching logic, were frequently a surprise. Having had a week or two for preparation, their thinking and reading bore fruit, enabling them to cope with their learned opponents with calm and

justifiable assurance. It was a time when publications of all sorts, and facilities for easy reference were scarce compared with to-day. Cramming was harder than now. Public school instruction was more limited in scope; yet there was an amount of mental ability, and what passes for general information shown in those neighborhood gatherings that left a decided intellectual impress. Talent in the rough commanded respect, and withstood many a trying test.

The New England Village Lyceum of two generations ago had another function than to furnish a forum for debate. It installed the system of Lectureship, which was far reaching in its stimulating effect at that period. And in doing this it is particularly noticeable that home-talent was so successfully brought into requisition. If resources were not sufficient to procure a brilliant professional lecturer from a distance, there was no lack of educated men near by, specialists of no inferior rank, who would willingly render gratuitous service. This school for the populace, specially fitted for rural districts, has had its day in most parts of New England. Railroads, newspapers and popular magazine literature have invaded lone sections, forcing the inhabitants to discard old agencies for new in ministering to their intellectual and social necessities. But there are those still living who have a memory of the more primitive methods which it is a delight to recall, as they would a long ago stage-ride through an enchanting country, instead of a dizzy whirl through space after the mode of modern speed-making inventions.

But what, more definitely, was the New England Village Lyceum of sixty or seventy years ago? How was it organized, and how conducted in detail? Tell of one of them what may be descriptive of hundreds more. In answer: it was a simple organization, the result of neighborhood talk and consultation about relieving the dullness of solitary homes amid a scattered population during the bleak Winter-season, and to accomplish this end, not in a frivolous and useless way, but by a more sensible, educational method. A general unanimity of opinion took form in concerted action. A posted notice having drawn together a sufficient number interested in the project, their deliberations resulted in the appointment of a committee to draft a suitable constitution for the organization. At an early date the committee submitted their report, which was formally accepted and adopted. The choice of officers having been made, the institution was orderly equipped for business. It had no need of legal incorporation. There is no record of the adoption of any By-Laws by the Lyceum, the rules and regulations embodied in the Constitution, with amendments, having probably proved sufficient for governing purposes.

The following is a copy of the Constitution of the Petersham Lyceum, adopted November 12, 1833. Its historical value is, not only that it was adopted by a number of people belonging to a single town, on a certain date, but for the additional circumstance already mentioned, that throughout New England at about the same period, numerous similar organizations were

formed under almost identical conditions. There was a simultaneous movement for a common purpose in enterprising townships, each making its own history. The initiatory practical lesson learned was how to *organize*, be the object worthy or unworthy. Bodies act through their delegated officials according to prescribed rules.

CONSTITUTION.

ARTICLE 1. The name of this Association shall be called the Petersham Lyceum.

ARTICLE 2. The objects of this Lyceum shall be the advancement of popular education and diffusion of useful knowledge.

ARTICLE 3. Any person who shall subscribe to this Constitution, and pay into the treasury the sum of twenty-five cents annually, may be constituted a member, and any individual so subscribing, who shall pay into the treasury, at any one time, the sum of one dollar and fifty cents, may be entitled to membership for life.

ARTICLE 4. The officers of this Lyceum shall consist of a President, Corresponding and Recording Secretary, Treasurer, and Executive Committee of five members, of whom the President, Secretary and Treasurer shall be members *ex-officio*.

ARTICLE 5. The officers of this Lyceum shall be chosen by ballot at each annual meeting, which shall be held on the first Thursday of November.

ARTICLE 6. The President, Secretary and Treasurer shall perform the duties implied in their respective offices, and the Executive Committee shall be considered as agent of the Lyceum to perform any business under its direction.

ARTICLE 7. Females, who may be desirous of becoming members of said Lyceum, may be so constituted by application to the Secretary, who is hereby authorized to record their names as such.

ARTICLE 8. All moneys received by the Treasurer for the benefit of the Lyceum shall be subject to the order of the Secretary, who shall receipt to the Treasurer for the same on receiving it, and shall make report at each annual meeting to the Lyceum of the amount of expenditures during the preceding year. And it shall be the duty of the Treasurer to make report, as required by the Secretary, of the amount of money paid into the treasury.

ARTICLE 9. In the absence of the President or Secretary at any meeting, a President, or Secretary, or both, as the case may require, shall be chosen *pro tem*.

ARTICLE 10. The President, with the advice and consent of the Executive Committee, shall have the power of calling a special meeting of the Lyceum at any time they may deem it expedient so to do.

ARTICLE 11. Nothing in this Constitution shall be construed to prevent the passing of any By-Laws which may be deemed necessary for the better promotion of the objects of the Lyceum.

ARTICLE 12. Any person wishing to dissolve his connection with said Lyceum, may do so by application to the Secretary.

ARTICLE 13. This Constitution may be amended at any annual meeting by a vote of two-thirds of the members of the Lyceum present, provided notice of the amendment and what it is proposed to be, shall be given at a meeting held at least one week before the said annual meeting.

After the reading of the foregoing Articles, the meeting "Voted, that they be accepted and adopted as the Constitution of the Petersham Lyceum, and to which, we, the subscribers, respectively agree to conform."

The record of subscriptions to the Constitution at the time of its adoption, and during the succeeding year (1834), includes the following names, male and female. The latter do not appear in subsequent entries of the Secretary. The list cannot fail to have a local interest for the generation of to-day.

MALE MEMBERS:—Luther Wilson, David S. Grosvenor, William Parkhurst, Cephas Willard, Lucius Spooner, Samuel Smith, Joseph Curtis, Leander Harding, N. F. Bryant, Henry Brooks, Thomas D. Brooks, Ashbel Goddard, George Gates, Samson Wetherell, Alanson Lincoln, David R. Grosvenor, Seth Hapgood, Libbeus Spooner, Washington Howe, Sylvanus Howe, Levi Knapp, Oren Tower, John Allen, Clark Mann, Aaron Brooks, Jr., Josiah D. Howe, Harrison Bancroft, Micajah Reed, Silas Foster, Nahum Gale, Forester Brooks, Robert Goddard, David J. Foster, Levi Hapgood, Stephen Howe, William H. Whipple, Joel Stearns, Isaac Ayres, Lewis Gale, Henry B. Ward, John Sanderson, Josiah White, Jared Weed, George R. Noyes, Asaph Browning, Lewis Sanderson, Austin Brooks, Sylvanus Gates, Lewis Whitney, Stephen Whiting, Ruel Farrar, George Bosworth, Jr., Paul Hildreth, A. H. Chamberlain, Gardner Farrar, William Goddard, Josiah Willard, Jonathan Sanderson, Jonas Howe,

George Gates, Gilbert Simmons, Simeon Brewer, Phinehas Brooks, Hubbard Peckham, Josiah Randall, Mark Piper, Daniel Ward, Charles Gates, William W. Loring—69.

FEMALE MEMBERS:—These, to the number of about fifty, were almost exclusively the wives or daughters of members whose names are before recorded. There is nothing to indicate that officially, or as lecturers, readers, songsters, or disputants they ever took part in the proceedings of the Lyceum. This state of things could not exist to-day in New England. A better era for woman has dawned.

The members who served as Presidents of the Lyceum were:—Dr. William Parkhurst, 1833-4; Col. Josiah White, 1835-6; Dr. George R. Noyes, 1837; Rev. J. H. Willis, 1841; Dr. Samuel Taylor, 1845; Rev. Luther Wilson, 1846; Deacon Hubbard Peckham, 1847.

The Secretaries of the Lyceum were:—N. F. Bryant, E. G. Chamberlain, Charles B. Moseley, John L. Gallond, C. S. Williams, Francis A. Brooks, P. Emory Aldrich, James Brown, Jr. Their terms of office of course varied in length.

The following is a nearly complete list of the persons who appeared before the Lyceum in the capacity of Lecturers, to which are added the dates when they officiated and the subjects they treated, unless omitted in the records:

Rev. Luther Wilson, Dec. 5, 1833.

Dr. Leander Harding, Dec. 12, 1833.

N. F. Bryant, Jan. 9, 1834.

- Rev. Luther Wilson, Jan. 23, 1834.
Esquire Knox of Hardwick, Feb. 6, 1834.
Jared Weed, Feb. 20, 1834.
Dr. George R. Noyes, Nov. 14, 1834. Education.
Mr. Heald, Mar. 5, 1835. Phrenology.
Dr. George R. Noyes, Nov. 19, 1835. Comets.
Rev. Dr. Thompson, Jan. 21, 1836. History of the
Arts of Writing and Printing.
Dr. George R. Noyes, Feb. 4, 1836. Duties of
Parents with Regard to School-teachers.
Dr. Samuel Taylor, Dec. 21, 1837. Formation and
Circulation of the Blood.
Jared Weed, Jan. 4, 1838. Animal Magnetism.
Dr. William Parkhurst, Feb. 1, 1838. The Oriental
Plague of the Fourteenth Century.
Rev. J. H. Willis, Dec. 20, 1838. The Utility of
Lyceums.
Dr. Alonzo Chapin of Barre, Jan. 3, 1839. The
Commerce of the Pacific Ocean.
Rev. John Goldsbury, Feb. 14, 1839. Common
Schools.
Jotham Rice, Jr., Feb. 28, 1839. Self-knowledge.
Rev. Mr. Fay of Barre, Mar. 14, 1839. Improve-
ment of the Age in Religion, Science and Gov-
ernment.
Dr. Russell of Barre, Mar. 27, 1839.
Rev. D. B. Parkhurst, Feb. 27, 1840. Character of
Mahomet.
Jared Weed, Mar. 26, 1840. Early History of
Petersham.
Rev. Mr. Talbot of Warren, Jan. 28, 1841. Phys-
ical Education.
Elihu Burrett, Mar. 11, 1841. Astronomy.
Rev. Mr. Coolidge, Dec. 4, 1845. Aborigines of
America.
Rev. Solomon Clark, Jan. 28, 1847.

Dr. William Parkhurst, Dec. 9, 1847. The Black Death.

Rev. E. Nute, Dec. 23, 1847.

Dr. Wilbur of Barre, Feb. 3, 1848. Characteristics and Follies of Modern Quackery.

Charles Brimblecom, Mar. 2, 1848. Genius and Character of Burns.

Such themes as the foregoing, ably handled, could leave no eagerly listening people suffering for the lack of mental nutriment. The absorption of ripe ideas and teachings conveyed by the instrumentality under consideration, was a high privilege for any community. And as showing the drift of current thought at the period we are reviewing, the topics chosen by the lecturers are of some account as a partial indication.

From November, 1841, to November, 1845, no connected records of meetings and proceedings appear, from which circumstance it may be inferred that during that interval the Lyceum was in a dormant state. At the last date there are references to a re-organization under a new Constitution, but nothing definite or hopeful can be gathered. Evidently there was no spontaneous and wide-awake rally to save the institution from continued decadence and final obliteration. It survived languidly till 1848, when changed conditions and circumstances forced it to give way to some more efficient substitute. It is hard to tell what in any measure has taken its place, if it were not town libraries, reading circles, or literary clubs. Its function was peculiar, and its disappearance is without possible reproduction. Time stamps it as a by-gone in Petersham or anywhere.

In the early period following the institution of town lyceums the uniform place for meetings was the Central District School-house, remembered by comparatively few now living, but the exterior of which has been so often illustrated in print as to have become a familiar object. The building was quite unpretentious, having a seating capacity when crowded of usually not more than one hundred, supplied with the plainest fittings throughout, and lighted by whale-oil and tallow candles, contributed by the neighborhood as occasion required. It was with such environment and facilities that groups of people joined in league to save unoccupied hours from listless idleness, and do what they might for mental improvement. How many by seizing upon such a privilege received the first impetus to a distinguished career may never be known. The fame of some must have been sounded through a widening field.

The Petersham Lyceum, for a town of its population, was certainly fortunate throughout its history in having on its roll of membership the names of an unusual number of professional men, whose attendance was as regular at its meetings, and who were as actively devoted to its interests as any class of their associates. Among these were Dr. George R. Noyes, Minister of the First Congregational (Unitarian) Church, Rev. Luther Wilson, Rev. Ephraim Nute, and Rev. John H. Willis, of the clerical fraternity; Jared Weed, Aaron Brooks, Jr., Francis A. Brooks, P. Emory Aldrich, and Charles K. Wetherell, of the legal profession; William Parkhurst, Leander Harding and Samuel

Taylor, Doctors of Medicine. These members were not honoraries holding themselves aloof in complacent dignity, but officers and working members of an humble local institution, lending to it necessarily tone and character. No conceit of superiority or affected reserve prevented their intimacy and cordial participation with members of all callings in the detail work of the organization. This peculiarity was strikingly exhibited by Dr. Noyes, who was soon to receive high honor by election to the Hancock Professorship of Hebrew and other Oriental Languages in Harvard University. That so distinguished a scholar, then absorbed in the critical work of translating for publication portions of the Old Testament, should have been inclined or able to adapt himself to a working membership in a village lyceum, is a noteworthy circumstance. Such willing co-operation is unusual. But recently a writer, in allusion to the larger work he was about at this very period, stated that the learned committee who had in charge the late revision of the Bible made fewer alterations, proportionally, from his translations than from those indorsed by any other authority. From this eminence as a specialist, Dr. Noyes doubtless had the good sense to see that there was a level of popular intelligence where, without compromise or waste of ability, he could join with neighbors and friends in mutual service.

In the *Monthly Journal of the Unitarian Association* (1868, p. 361), the editor (supposed to have been Dr. James Freeman Clark), noticing the then recent death of Dr. Noyes, made a statement which may be

quoted for its bearing upon the subject of his eulogy, indicating the probable advantage he derived from his ready mingling with people of ordinary intelligence, who, though not sharing academic honors, or graced with liberal culture, were nevertheless level-headed and well versed in practical matters. He says :

“ His first series of translations from the Old Testament was prepared for publication while he was pastor of a society. * * * We believe that the clearness and sagacity and practical wisdom which characterize his interpretation of the Bible, was cultivated in part by the experience among men which was gained during his life as a minister, and that his scholarship would have been less valuable and complete if he had been a mere student and recluse.”

The debating of questions previously assigned was a prominent part of the exercises of the Village Lyceum. Topics for discussion were submitted to the Executive Committee, and their choice determined the selection. There is more than the interest of curiosity in noting the trend of popular thought at that earlier time, when circulating literature and school studies were not what they now are. Current events of public importance were certain not to be overlooked. Sectarian theology and partizan politics were excluded to prevent irritation and discord. This exclusion was by common consent. There remained the controverted theories and perplexing problems relating to Education, Good Citizenship, Temperance, War, School Government, Foreign Immigration, and Slavery. Likewise there were always stock questions commonly appropriated by similar organizations

far and near. Strictly technical subjects had to be ignored, except by lecturers of repute, although it was not uncommon for disputants to trespass further than was warranted on the domains of science and art, who had better not have made the hazardous venture. However, the audiences were not as a rule sharply critical, but charitably inclined toward those who had lacked opportunity for culture and improving practice.

Would space permit it might be well to copy largely from the list of questions which actually came under debate during the existence of the Lyceum. Few, if any, of them were visionary, weak or unpractical in their suggestion. They touched on affairs of vital interest, and were sensibly and earnestly treated. Some specimens from the records are here submitted :

Is a liberal education a better legacy for a parent to bestow upon a son than an independent fortune?

Have games of chance, when played for amusement, an immoral tendency?

Which has the more deleterious tendency, slander or flattery?

Will the admission of all members of Christian societies, demeaning themselves decently and in order to a participation in all Christian rights and privileges, without the requirement of a subscription to human creeds or human covenants, have a tendency to promote the cause of Christianity?

Ought further restrictions to be placed upon foreign emigrants with regard to the right of suffrage?

Is the French Government justified in the stand it has recently taken with regard to this country?

Is it constitutional or expedient to admit Texas into the Union?

Are the disorders in our common schools to be attributed chiefly to the teachers?

Is the Union more endangered by the spirit of party than by diversity of interests in different parts of the country?

Ought the Legislature to impose a tax of one per cent. on all incorporated banks?

Is a representative bound in all cases by the will of his constituents?

Ought judicial oaths to be administered?

Are moral reformatations better promoted by organized societies or individual effort?

Is it impossible for two races of men to live together on terms of equality and peace?

Is wealth more favorable to the development of mental powers than poverty?

Is the compensation the different branches of industry now receive founded upon just and equitable principles?

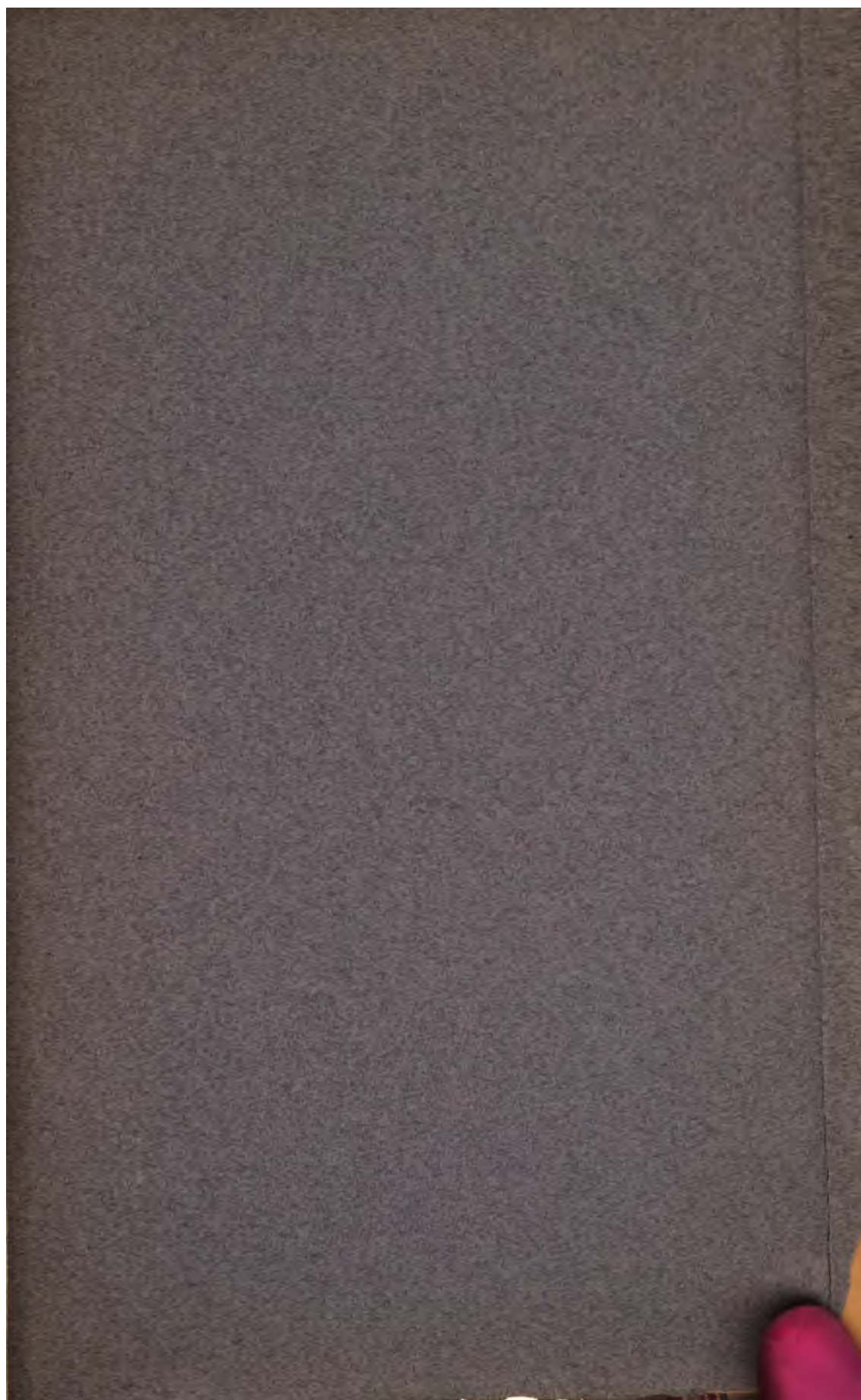
Is the acquisition of foreign territory dangerous to the perpetuity of the Union?

A community will not go into mental, moral or political decline, whose members are alive to such themes as are embodied in the foregoing series of questions.

The old-time Village Lyceum was, first of all, a *gathering*; it led to intercourse, and that was what isolated populations rationally desired. The sociability it furnished was not for a trivial end, but coupled

with a purpose to enlarge mental scope and tone up the moral powers. The Lyceum worked silently but powerfully against all class-feeling, jealousies, and rivalries that were liable to crop out and become unhealthy irritants in an otherwise friendly and harmonious neighborhood. It was a leveler of shallow and unreal distinction by raising the educational and moral standard of character. The more learned withheld nothing they could freely communicate, while the less informed were eager to broaden their field of knowledge. Native talent told for what it was worth when the intelligent farmer or blacksmith often showed himself the master of the situation in a hot debate with his scholarly and trained antagonist. The institution grew out of actual conditions—it existed because of a temporary necessity, and did not disappear without an abundant vindication of its utility. Changes in instrumentalities and methods are all the while going on—new forces and adaptations come with every succeeding age—grander things than the fathers knew are daily opening to the vision of their children; and so it will be on and on. Exultant as we may be over this mighty and constant movement towards loftier ends, if in a subdued and reflective mood some reminiscent thought flits back to the former days of “small things,” let us give it our hospitable welcome, and nurture it awhile for the sweet associations it brings, although too soon our reverie must end, and our consciousness become absorbed with the myriad activities that mark the stupendous progress of the passing years.

NOTE.—It has been a not unpleasant self-imposed task for one who has lived among a people in ministerial relations, many of whose names appear on the preceding pages, to save from oblivion some fragments of history left by a past generation to the memory of a fast decreasing number of survivors. His hope is, and his reward in such case will be, that the foregoing pages will revive agreeable recollections, awaken feelings of obligations to those who wrought a good work with more hardship than is cheerfully borne in these days, and in their genuine love of knowledge, as well as gratitude for its moderate acquisitions, made themselves worthy examples for all who may abide in their once familiar places. It is a fine art to use memory so as to nourish present life.







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